

A. A biblical window into interpersonal conflict and formation

Read Philippians 2: 1-11

What themes in the first half of the text (vs. 1-5) give rise to the second half of the text (vs. 6-11)?

Paul is clearly setting up a sharp contrast between the Roman social **ethos of rivalry and conceit** (conceit in Greek is 'kenodoxia', literally 'empty glory' or in King James, 'vainglory') and the social **ethos of a new church** which is patterned after Jesus who willingly emptied himself (kenosis) of the desire for deity-like power and glory in order to serve others. What is at stake for Paul is the communal unity of the church which is displayed through covenantal love and faithfulness, and which becomes a living demonstration of God's core character of love and faithfulness.

Understanding the concept of CRUCIFORMITY. Theologian Michael Gorman explains how 'cruciformity' – from 'cruciform' (cross-shaped) plus 'conformity' – means lived-out conformity to Christ crucified. *"Because the living Christ remains the crucified one, cruciformity is Spirit-enabled conformity to the indwelling crucified and resurrected Christ... (the one) who re-shapes all relationships and responsibilities to express the self-giving, life-giving love of God that was displayed on the cross."*

Main premise so far: Philippians 2 is ultimately about the *way* we relate to each other.

Exercise #1 (in triads):

Expressions of rivalry and conceit in the Roman context can seem pretty extreme. But on a lower level, they can find expression in our own lives. Share in your group how they find expression in interpersonal relationships and also share how the word 'defensiveness' relates to both rivalry and conceit.

B. Understanding Conflict Responses and Communication Dynamics

Relational conflict is a normal, inevitable part of the human life, but how we respond to conflict can often make all the difference between things getting better or things getting worse. On the simplest level, our responses to conflict can fall into two general styles:



What is your default style of responding to unexpected or jarring conflict?

Exercise #2 (in triads):

Question 1: What kind of physical symptoms do you experience when you face emotional conflicts?

Question 2: What happens communication-wise between you and others when you feel defensive?

The concept of a **Third Way Response** to conflict is a third option to Fight or Flight. It means staying present to a situation without pushing back or retreating, without being offensive or defensive, and seeking to connect with the other person through constructive dialogue and genuine listening.

C. Understanding Servanthood (Kenotic) Communication

Third Way communication responses to conflicts are essentially ones that are not driven by our egos or self-protective interests. This fits well with the Philippians passage...

“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.” (2:3) Humility is not an inward virtue but a relational virtue.

When applied to our communication habits with others, such humility compels us to yield our speech and listening energy *toward* the other person, rather than drawing the communication energy back to ourselves. Such mindful word-care is **Other-Centered, Agape-Driven, and Servant-Oriented.**

Optional Exercise (in pairs) Sitting across from your partner, imagine a plot of land between both of you that rests on a plane at your heart or chest level. Using land-based metaphors (for example: property lines, occupied territory, castles, tunnels, etc.) describe a scenario of conflict between yourselves. Second time: describe a scenario of constructive resolution or reconciliation using land-based metaphors. (Option: draw out the interactions on an 11 x 17 sheet of paper.)

Most problems can be boiled down to **DISPUTES** or **HARMS**. And quite often a conflict involves a combination of both. (Biblical examples: Dispute: Acts 6:1f Grecian Jews neglected
Harm: Genesis 37f Joseph sold to Egypt)

In both cases, mistrust between both sides rises, and this sets up **COMMUNICATION WALLS**. Re-building trust, therefore, is foundational, and this relies on **COMMUNICATION BRIDGES**.

Listening Exercise (in pairs) Person A shares a past story of being in a conflict and possibly feeling hurt by the situation. Person B only listens. After 5 minutes, B shares a personal story while A listens.

D. Practicing Three Servanthood Communication Skills

“Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.” (2:4)

1. The ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Gives the other person the invitation to say more and to go deeper

2. The QUESTION

Keeps the conversational center of gravity with the other person

3. The RESTRAINT

Shows your non-controlling calmness and honors the other’s thinking space

Exercise #3 (in triads): Select a ‘hot potato’ topic and then role-play a conversation during which you can each practice all three skills that ‘exalt’ the interests of others.